

Some Aspects of the Progressive Theology of the Church of St. Thomas Christians before its Westernization

— Dr. Paul Pallath —

Introductory Remarks

For the St Thomas Christians, Christianity was not a set of doctrines, concepts or dogmas, but a way of life (*margam*) to reach God the Father, which Christ, “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14: 6) realized through his paschal mysteries and which the Apostle Thomas introduced into India (*Thoma margam*). Although the St Thomas Christians did not produce any abstract philosophical or theological treatise, they lived a profound theology consonant with the way or law of Thomas, which should be traced from their customs, traditions as well as *modus vivendi et agendi*. This is more so because during the official visits conducted by Archbishop Menezes after the Synod of Diamper and later by the Latin bishops Francis Rose SJ (1599-1624) and Stephen Brito SJ (1624-1641), all the Syriac books and manuscripts, which enshrined the theological, spiritual, liturgical, hagiographical and historical traditions of the St Thomas Christians were burned.¹ It is possible to obtain some information concerning the ecclesial life of the St Thomas Christians before the sixteenth century from the writings of the Western missionaries and from the acts and decrees of the Synod of Diamper. But they often present exaggerations, generalizations and calumnies intended to demonise the St Thomas Christians and to stigmatise them as pagans, Nestorians and schismatics, with the purpose of demonstrating the “great achievement” of the Western missionaries, who “converted them to Catholicism” in the Synod of Diamper in 1599. Hence such writings are not fully reliable and they cannot be used even as a mere source of information without sufficient discernment and intelligent historico-cultural hermeneutics.

The Church of the St Thomas Christians was not an offshoot or ramification of the Church of the East. It is true that the St Thomas Christian Church, originated from the evangelising ministry of the Apostle Thomas, had to depend on the Church of the East for the appointment and consecration of bishops as well as for the enrichment and perfection of its Thomistic liturgical and spiritual heritage. Consequently, in the course of time the East Syrian tradition became the common basic tradition of the Indian and Persian Churches, which directly or indirectly trace their origin back to the Apostle Thomas and venerate him as their patron. In spite of this the Indian Church had developed its own theological visions, particular ecclesial and liturgical traditions as well as autonomous administrative system. The theology of the St Thomas Christians depends on that of the Church of the East in so far as the principle "lex orandi lex credendi" can be validly applied to the Indian Church. In any case, since the St Thomas Christians maintained hierarchical relationship with the Church of the East from time immemorial until the Synod of Diamper in 1599 and since they celebrated the faith in accordance with the East Syrian liturgical tradition, the doctrinal position of the Church of the East may be regarded as a theological antecedent for any serious consideration of the theology of the Indian Eastern Church.

In this article we have adopted a methodology of encounter and confrontation. We often compare and contrast the activities and theological vision of Western missionaries with those of the St Thomas Christians in order to unveil the progressive theology of the latter. Finally, as the title itself indicates, this article is not a comprehensive study of the theology of the Indian Christians.

1. A Balanced and Equilibrated Mariology

In accordance with our methodology we have to consider the Mariology of the Church of the East before evaluating the mariological vision of the St Thomas Christians. In fact, "the Christian faithful of the Church of the East have great veneration for Our Lady. Every day they have invocations and prayers in honour of the Blessed virgin. Their Divine Office, which is very ancient, has many beautiful prayers and hymns to venerate the Blessed Mother. They celebrate their Divine Office in which the faithful take part. These prayer books are equally their theological expositions. The whole doctrine is exposed and explained in hymns, prayers and invocations".²

The Church of the East generally employs the title "Mother of Christ" in order to refer to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It sometimes uses the designation "Mother of God the Son", but avoids the expression "Mother of God" without qualification, because it may indicate the Divine Trinity or any one of the Trinity.³ As the liturgical prayers of the Church of the East demonstrate, it admits without any shadow of doubt the virginity of Mary, her Immaculate Conception and Assumption into heaven.⁴ Elias of Jerusalem (9th century) explains well why the Church of the East hesitates to use the title Mother of God without qualification:

That the Nestorians deny Mary ought to be called 'Mother of God' is not denying the Divinity of Christ, nor the descent of the Divine Word who is the same as the King of ages, into the holy Mother of Christ. The Nestorians refuse Mary to be called Mother of God, because the exalted and the glorious name 'God' signifies the Trinity of Persons, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; On the contrary, the name "Christ" properly connotes Son only, not the Father, nor the Holy Spirit. Hence, if we call Mary Mother of God, we may appear as attributing generation and birth to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. If on the other hand we call Mary Mother of Christ who is God of ages, we affirm the Son alone to have been born of her: to affirm this is not of course to deny Christ is God.⁵

The profession of faith of Isayahb, the archbishop of Nisibis, which Sabr-Iso V, the patriarch of the of the East, sent to the Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) in 1247, states clearly why the Church of the East is reluctant to apply the expression "Mother of God" without qualification to Mary. The content of this profession of faith regarding Mariology can be summarized thus: the word Christ signifies "perfect God and perfect man", but the word "God signifies the Trinity, and stands for the Father, and stands for the Son, and stands for the Holy Spirit; and when it is said Mary brought forth God, the unlearned may sometimes think that she brought forth the Trinity, or the Father, or the Holy Spirit". Since Christ is God the Son united, by the simple expression Mary brought forth Christ, the whole truth is indicated without any confusion.⁶ In brief, the mariological doctrine of the Church of the East is authentic, complete and fully compatible with the definitions of the ecumenical councils.

As a matter of fact, in the New Testament Mary is presented as the “mother of Jesus Christ” (cf. Mt 1: 18), “his mother” namely mother of Jesus Christ (Mt 1: 11, 13-14, 20, 21, 12: 46, 13: 55; Mk 3: 31; Lk 2: 33-34, 51, 8: 19; Jn 1: 12, 19-27), or simply “mother of Jesus” (Jn: 2, 1-5; Acts 1, 14), but never the expression “mother of God” is found. However, from the Scripture one can easily understand that Mary is the mother of God, because Jesus Christ is God’s beloved Son (Mt 3: 17, 17: 5; Mk 9: 7; Lk 9: 35), the Son of God (Mt 8: 29; Mk 3: 11, 5: 7; Lk 1, 35, 22: 70; Jn 1: 34, 49, 3: 17-18, 5: 25, 10: 36, 11: 4), truly the Son of God (Mt 14: 33, 27: 54; Mk 15: 39), “Christ the Son of God” (Mt 16: 16, 16: 63-64; Mk 1: 1; Jn 11: 27, 20: 31) and “My Lord and my God” (Jn 20: 28). Hence it is highly biblical and fully Catholic to designate Mary “Mother of Christ”.

Although in some books found among the St Thomas Christians the expression “Mother of Christ”, was used, the designation “Mother of God” was not alien to them. Fr Francis Ros SJ, who arrived in India in 1583 and became professor of Syriac at the Jesuit Seminary of Vaipicotta in 1587, examined a few Chaldean books present in Kerala and composed a treatise entitled: *De Erroribus Nestorianorum qui in hac India Orientali versantur*, extracting from those books what he considered “Nestorian heretical doctrines” and translating them into Latin.⁷ Although his intention was to attribute Nestorianism to the St Thomas Christians, his honesty permitted him to admit that even if in some of the books possessed by the priests, there were a few expressions, which he considered “heretical”, they “publicly preach the Divine Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary” (“*His enim non obstantibus, publice Beatam Virginem Dei matrem predicant*”).⁸ D. Ferroli SJ, who published a comprehensive study of the activities of the Jesuits in Malabar in two volumes in his evaluation of “The Religious Conditions of the St Thomas Christians in the Sixteenth Century” attests that “They had great devotion to Our Lady, and honoured her Nativity, Purification and Assumption”.⁹

The devotion of the St Thomas Christians to Mary, the mother of Christ the Son of God, was exceptional and outstanding. In fact, the vast majority of the churches erected before the sixteenth century in Kerala, are in the name of Blessed Virgin Mary. Some of such historically important and ancient churches are: Nagapuzha, Arakuzha, Bharananganam, Kaduthuruthy, Kuravilangad, Kallorkadu, Changanacherry, Mooshikulam, Kanjoor and Alangadu.¹⁰ Of course the St Thomas Christians did not dedicate their important churches to a mere woman of Palestine, but to Mary, the mother

of Christ, the Son of God. Of the aforementioned churches the St Mary's Church at Kuravilangadu (4th century) is very important, since it was a very ancient Christian centre, which supplied the archdeacons, heads and governors of the St Thomas Christians for more than thousand years. About this church Francis Ros SJ, who was appointed the first Latin archbishop of the St Thomas Christians (1599-1624), wrote in his *Relação sobre a Serra*, "The Church of Kuravilangadu was built much before the Portuguese reached India. It is in the name of the Mother of God".¹¹ A metal church-bell cast in 1584 and kept even today in the church in Kuravilangadu, calls the Virgin Mary *emmèh d'âlâha*, Mother of God. All these point to the fact that even when the St Thomas Christians had used the most appropriate biblical title "Mother of Christ" to refer to Blessed Virgin Mary, they had no intention to deny the divine motherhood of Mary, as some prejudiced Western missionaries had imagined.

The Council of Ephesus (431) decreed "If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore the holy Virgin is the mother of God (for she bore in a fleshy way the Word of God become flesh) let him be anathema".¹² It is evident that Mary is called the mother of God "because the holy virgin bore in the flesh God who was united hypostatically with the flesh".¹³ The content of doctrine of the Council of Ephesus is fully in agreement with the Mariology of the Church of the East, which confesses Mary as the mother of God the Son, and especially with that of the St Thomas Christians, among whom even the title mother of God was prevalent. Neither the Council of Ephesus nor any other ecumenical council prohibited calling the holy virgin "mother of Christ". Moreover none of the ecumenical councils or Roman Pontiffs prescribed that the title "mother of God" is to be exclusively used for Mary. Even in the post Tridentine Roman Missal several titles such as Blessed Virgin Mary, Virgin Mary, Holy Mary, mother of your beloved Son, mother of Jesus, mother of Christ, mother of Lord Jesus Christ, mother of your only Son, mother of God and Our Lord Jesus Christ, etc are used.¹⁴ Since even in the Tridentine Missal the expression mother of Christ is found, it is incomprehensible that some Western missionaries strove in vain to accuse the St Thomas Christians of heresy because they sometimes used the same title.

Pope John Paul II and Mar Dinkha IV (the Catholicos Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East) signed a common declaration on 11 November

1994, in which they affirmed that the controversies of the past and “the divisions brought about in this way were due in large part to misunderstandings” and that “they can indeed, from now on, proclaim together before the world their common faith in the mystery of incarnation”.¹⁵ With regard to Mariology the declaration states:

Christ therefore is not an “ordinary man” whom God adopted in order to reside in him and inspire him, as in the righteous ones and the prophets. But the same God the Word, begotten of his Father before all worlds without beginning according to his divinity, was born of a mother without a father in the last times according to his humanity. The humanity to which the Blessed Virgin Mary gave birth always was that of the Son of God himself. That is the reason why the Assyrian Church of the East is praying the Virgin Mary as “the Mother of Christ our God and Saviour”. In the light of this same faith the Catholic tradition addresses the Virgin Mary as “Mother of God” and also as “the Mother of Christ”. We both recognize the legitimacy and rightness of these expressions of the same faith and we both respect the preference of each Church in her liturgical life and piety.¹⁶

This declaration publicly proclaimed the authenticity and catholicity of the title mother of Christ and acknowledged that the Catholic tradition also addresses the Virgin Mary as the mother Christ. In fact, both in the post Tridentine and post Vatican Roman missals, Mary is also designated mother of Christ.

Although this christological declaration does not directly affect the St Thomas Christians who have always regarded Mary as Mother of God, it dispels every doubt of the sceptics, regarding the authentic faith of the St Thomas Christians before the sixteenth century. After the declaration, it is all the more evident that when the Church of the East and the St Thomas Christians called Mary “Mother of Christ” and when the Churches in the ancient Roman Empire adopted the expression “mother of God”, all of them intended the very same thing, namely Mary is the mother of God the Son, and not the mother of the most Holy Trinity. Hence there is no difference in the essential content of the faith, in spite of the legitimate variety of titles and expressions.

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The equilibrated Mariology of the St Thomas Christians before its westernisation fully corresponds to the mariological doctrine expounded by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium* numbers 52-69. The profound veneration of the St Thomas Christians to the Blessed Virgin who always prefers to be "ancilla Domini" (Lk 1, 38), never deviated into Mariolatry which equates Mary to God or elevates her above the unique mediator of redemption between God and human beings (1 Tim 2, 5-6).

2. The Primacy of the Roman Pontiff

In accordance with our methodology, as a theological antecedent to an evaluation of the doctrine of Roman primacy among the St Thomas Christians, we have to consider the primacy of the Roman Pontiff as understood by the Persian Church. In fact, as the official books of the Church of the East such as Pontificals, Divine Office and canonical collections unambiguously demonstrate, this Church believed in the divinely instituted primacy of Peter and his successors in the universal Church, as it was understood in the first millennium.¹⁷ The Church of the East considered the Patriarch of Rome as the "head of the patriarchs", the first patriarch who "has jurisdiction over patriarchs as the blessed Peter had it over the whole universal Church", as the Vicar of Christ having power over all patriarchs, superiors and all Christian faithful, and as the one who "resides in Rome in the place of Peter" and has "the guardianship of the Universal Church".¹⁸

Since the liturgical books and canonical collections of the Church of the East, which contained the doctrine of the divinely instituted primacy of the Roman Pontiff over the Universal Church, were present in Malabar, one can *a priori* presume that the doctrine of primacy was part of the faith of the St Thomas Christians. The Jesuit father Francis Dionysio, who came to India in 1563 and who was the Rector of the Jesuit residence at Cochin from 1576-1578, after he had been sufficiently acquainted with the faith and customs of the St Thomas Christians, wrote in a letter in 1578:

These Christians commonly believe in all the articles of the Nicene Creed and the equality of the divine persons and the two natures and one person in Christ. ... They regard the Pope as the Vicar of Christ our Redeemer on earth, and their

Patriarch as subject to the Pope from whom his powers are communicated to him.¹⁹

This statement demonstrates that the St Thomas Christians believed in the primacy of the Pope as it was recognized in the Christian East. The St Thomas Christians considered the Pope as the "Vicar of Christ" and recognized that even their patriarch received his powers from the Pope.

The St Thomas Christians very cordially received the papal legate Bishop John de Marignolli, who reached Quilon in Kerala on 23 March 1346. He stayed with them for 16 months and received from them a hundred gold *fanamas* every month, which they paid to him "as prerequisite of my office as papal legate" (*pro meo officio tamquam Legatus Papae*). When he left, the St Thomas Christians gave him a thousand *fanamas*.²⁰ The warm reception accorded to the Papal Delegate and the payment of a sort of monthly allowance to him, demonstrate the great respect and veneration of these Christians towards the Bishop of Rome, the successor of St Peter.

The history of Joseph the Indian illustrates further the attitude of the St Thomas Christians towards the successor of Saint Peter, the Pope of Rome. In 1490 he went to Mesopotamia as a representative of the St Thomas Christians in order to fetch bishops for the Indian Church from the patriarch, who found Joseph "fairly well instructed" and ordained him a priest. When he returned to Malabar with two bishops, he came to know about the arrival of some Portuguese Christians in Malabar. Having been acquainted with those Portuguese, whom he considered his brethren in faith, in 1501 he sailed with them to see the Pope in Rome and to visit the holy places in Palestine. In Rome he revealed that his Pontiff was called Catholica, who sent bishops to India and this Catholica ruled in the name of Peter. He also made known to the Pope that his Catholica in Mesopotamia was elected with the authority of the Roman Pontiff.²¹ Commenting on the voyage of Joseph the Indian and on his declarations concerning the primacy of the Roman Pontiff the famous scholar G. Schurhammer SJ affirmed:

His long and dangerous pilgrimage to Rome to the successor of St. Peter, and his explanations which he gave to Alexander VI about the primacy of Rome, by the authority of which, he says, that their Cardinals elect their Catholicos in

Mesopotamia, show, that he considered himself not a heretic or schismatic, but a Catholic, a true child of the one true Church founded on the rock of St. Peter, from whom his Catholicos derived his power through Antioch.

This testimony is important, for Joseph was not a simple, ignorant layman, but he was the representative, whom the Syro-Malabarians having been without bishops for generations in 1490 sent to Mesopotamia to their Catholicos to get from him bishops for India. We must, therefore, see in him also the representative of his Indian brethren and as he left India already in 1501, by the first ships he met of the Portuguese, he gives us not only his own private opinion about the primacy of St. Peter, but also *the opinion of the Syro-Malabarian Christians before the coming of the Portuguese*. This explains also the attitude of the same Christians towards the Portuguese from the very beginning, who saw in them always their brethren in faith.²²

In brief one can rightly affirm that the doctrine of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, the successor of St Peter, was deep rooted in the ecclesial consciousness of the St Thomas Christians even before the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries in India.

It is true that until 1599 the bishops of the St Thomas Christians were not appointed by the Pope of Rome, but by the patriarch of the Church of the East. This is to be evaluated in the background of the fact that in the whole first millennium and even later the appointment of bishops in the Eastern Churches was not considered part of the Roman primacy. In the words of W. De Vries, an eminent Eastern scholar, "We do not know in the first millennium any case of a direct nomination of a metropolitan or a simple bishop from Rome, within the territory of Oriental patriarchates".²³ Hence the reception of bishops appointed by the Patriarch of the East, the canonical head of the St Thomas Christians at that epoch, cannot be regarded as prejudicial to the primacy of the Roman Pontiff. A letter written by three lay Christian leaders to Pope Gregory XIII in 1578 *inter alia* requests the Pope to "recommend us by your letters to our Patriarch that he may send us five bishops as they were formerly sent by our Patriarch".²⁴ The St Thomas Christians did not request the Pope to appoint five bishops for them, but only ask him to recommend to

their patriarch to do so. As in the whole Christian Orient, according to the self-consciousness of the St Thomas Christians too, appointment of bishops was the prerogative of the patriarch.

The doctrine of the divinely instituted primacy of the Roman Pontiff, the successor of St Peter, was part of the faith of the St Thomas Christians even before the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries, but like the Christian faithful of other Eastern Churches they had no idea of Pope's "primacy of ordinary power over all the eparchies and their groupings" as stipulated in the new Eastern Code (cf. CCEO c. 45). This has to be considered in the light of the fact that although the essential theological content of Roman primacy has always remained the same, the mode of its exercise varied down through the centuries especially with regard to the Eastern Churches.

3. Church as the People of God

For the St Thomas Christians, Church was really and effectively the people of God. The Church as the people of God was manifested in an intensive manner in *pallyogam*, which was an assembly of the lay Christian faithful and priests. The members of the assembly enjoyed perfect equality and it was an effective means for maintaining communion and solidarity in the community.²⁵ There were three kinds of such assemblies: the parish *yogam*, the regional *yogam* and the general *yogam*.

1. *Parish Yogam*: assembly of the heads of the Christian families and priests of a parish, usually under the presidency of the senior priest. This assembly enjoyed legislative, administrative and judicial powers within the parish. Each parish was autonomous and self sufficient in the sense that its assembly freely acquired and alienated property, selected and trained candidates for the priesthood, maintained the priests, deacons and seminarians, administered the temporal goods and exercised vigilance over the whole ecclesial and spiritual life of the parish. Priests were not ordained for the diocese but for the parish. The assembly had even the power to excommunicate public delinquents and sinners. The excommunicated had to undergo the penance imposed upon by the assembly; then a priest would absolve him or her at the door of the church.²⁶ All were bound to obey the decisions of the assembly in matters within its competence.

2. *Regional Yogam*: assembly of the priests and representatives of the Christian faithful of a region of at least four parishes. Such *yogam* was often convoked

for the administration of justice. Reflecting on the capital punishment unjustly and arbitrarily inflicted on cathanar (priest) Chacko of Edappalli by the Western missionaries, Thomas Paremmakkal, the administrator of the St Thomas Christians from 1787 to 1799 writes: "All are aware that according to the ancient custom of the Malabar Church no punishment could be inflicted unless the crime was proved before the representatives of four churches".²⁷ Again this was one of the main conditions put forward by the general church-assembly at Angamaly in 1778 for settling the disputes between the Church and the foreign missionaries: "no punishment would be meted out for any grave crime committed by the priests or lay men before the matter was judged by the representatives of four churches".²⁸ Therefore, according to the Malabar custom only the regional *yogam* was competent to judge the serious cases of priests and other Christian faithful and no authority including bishops could inflict any punishment on them even for grave crimes until the representatives of four churches heard the case and pronounced their judgment to that effect.

3. General *Yogam*: assembly of the priests and representatives of the Christian faithful of all the parishes of the Church of St Thomas Christians convoked and presided over by the archdeacon of all India. Matters pertaining to the whole community were not decided by the metropolitan nor by the archdeacon, but only by the general assembly. With regard to this Paremmakkal states: "In all the things mentioned above the Malabar churches acted rightly as their forefathers used to do in the past. Matters pertaining to the whole community were not decided by one or two churches: all the churches used to assemble together to deal with such matters".²⁹ The general assembly was the supreme authority of the Indian Church of St Thomas Christians and it enjoyed legislative, judicial and administrative powers over the whole Church.

The effective realization of the Church as the people of God had its consequences on the authority and role of the bishops. Before the sixteenth century the bishops of the St Thomas Christians were not operators of politics, diplomatics or tactics for winning over the "opponents", causing ultimately only harm to the common good of the Church, but spiritual heads and *dispensatores Dei*, who led an austere and contemplative life like the sages and saints of India. They never intervened in the administration of the temporal affairs of the Church, which was done by the parish, regional and the general *yogams* in their respective levels. Priests were not vicars or

servi episcoporum, but selected from the parish community and trained and sustained by the parish *yogam* for celebrating the sacred mysteries for the spiritual good of the community. With regard to the role of the bishops of the St Thomas Christians before the sixteenth century Prof. X. Koodapuzha rightly observes:

The bishops of the St Thomas Christians were not involved in the administration of the Church. Following the pattern of life of the saints and sages of the Eastern and Indian tradition they preferred to live as spiritual men spending their life in prayer, study, fasting and other ascetic practices. Liturgical celebrations were solemn occasions of the public manifestation of the faith of the community. The bishops presided on such occasions. It was a communitarian expression of their Catholic communion.³⁰

In brief, the bishops of the St Thomas Christians, who were chiefly occupied with the *munus sanctificandi*, the celebration of the Holy Mysteries, were spiritual heads, without much interest in the governance and administration of the Church.

Before the sixteenth century, no important decision concerning the Indian Church could have been taken without the involvement of the general assembly, the supreme authority of this Church. The general assembly, presided over by the archdeacon of all India, in which the representatives of the clergy and the Christian faithful of all the parishes participated with active vote, was the greatest manifestation of the Church as the people of God as well as the unity and communion of the St Thomas Christians, who at that epoch were dispersed in different native kingdoms.

When the Latin bishops began to govern the St Thomas Christians in 1599, the progressive concept of episcopacy of these Christians entered into sharp contrast with the Western imperialist episcopacy. In the West, since the Middle Ages bishops had gradually become “mini monarchs”, who had no regard for their brother bishops (organs of collegial governance completely disappeared), and who hardly permitted any kind of participation of the Christian faithful in the administration of the Church. Such monarchic episcopacy was absolutely incompatible with the spiritual episcopacy prevalent among the St Thomas Christians for at least thousand

years. One of the main reasons for the *Coonan Cross Oath* in 1653 and the subsequent schism was the strenuous efforts of the Latin bishops to exclude the *yogam* and the native archdeacon from the administration of the Church.

The participation of the lay Christian faithful in the ecclesial life of the St Thomas Christians in India by means of the glorious institute of *palliyogam* was far greater than that of the West even after the promulgation of *Lumen gentium*, which officially teaches that Church is the people of God (cf. LG 9-17). While evaluating such high role of the lay Christian faithful in the life of the St Thomas Christian Church, one has to consider also the great ecclesial consciousness of those faithful, who at that epoch were even ready to sacrifice their lives for defending and safeguarding the law of Thomas as well as the authentic liturgical and spiritual heritage of their Church. The lay Christian faithful even prevented those priests from the community of St Thomas Christians, who were trained by the Latin missionaries with the intention of gradually converting the Christians to the acceptance of Latin customs, jurisdiction and rite, from exercising ministry in their parishes. So such Latinised St Thomas Christian priests had to go to the Latin diocese of Cochin.³¹

4. Theology of Particular Individual Church

The concept of the St Thomas Christians concerning the individual Church was very profound and immensely rich. They held that each individual Church could have its own liturgy, spiritual life, administrative autonomy and mode of living the Catholic faith in the particular socio-cultural context of the place. The Indian Christians designated their liturgical, spiritual and disciplinary traditions and customs as the way or law of Thomas, which in fact contained their whole ecclesial, socio-political and cultural *modus vivendi et agendi*. For them the law of Thomas was sacrosanct and inviolable, since they believed that the Apostle had directly bequeathed it to their forefathers. In brief, the pre-sixteenth century theology of the Indian Christians concerning individual particular Church corresponds even to the communion ecclesiology of Vatican II.

The Western missionaries had a totally different concept of Church, which was absolutely incompatible with the ecclesiology of the St Thomas Christians. According to the Western missionaries the Catholic Church was the Latin Church, headed by the Roman Pontiff, the Catholic rite was

the Latin rite and the Catholic jurisdiction was the Latin jurisdiction. They practically identified the Catholic Church, the Catholic faith and the Catholic canon law with the Latin Church, the Latin rite and the Latin canonical discipline. In other words there was only one perfect Church, one pure rite and one authentic jurisdiction in the Catholic Church. Consequently other individual particular Churches were non-catholic, other rites were heretical and other jurisdictions were schismatic. Comparing the ecclesiology of the St Thomas Christians and that of the Western missionaries J. Perumthottam writes:

Thus, the missionaries and the Mar Thoma Christians had different ecclesiological visions. The former wished for uniformity, and the latter unity in diversity. This difference in ecclesiological perspectives was the basic reason of conflicts between missionaries and the Mar Thoma Christians all throughout the missionary period. With an ecclesiology, having stress on uniformity the missionaries presented the Latin Church as the one, apostolic Catholic Church, and all other ecclesial communities as parts which ought to be conformed to it. They looked at the Mar Thoma Christian community less Catholic and inferior, in so far as they did not conform to the Latin Church.³²

The consequence of such a militant and triumphalist ecclesiology was disastrous. As A. M. Mundadan rightly states, "Every ecclesiastical practice, every element of Rite which differed from the Latin and the Western ways was considered an abuse, an error, the result of heresy and superstitions".³³

G. M. Schurhammer, a prominent Western scholar confirms: "We know that the Portuguese... missionaries and laymen, did not know much of the Chaldean rite, and they often called heretical whatever was different from the Latin rite and that therefore the ideal thing for them was to win the Syro-Malabarian Christians over to the Latin Rite".³⁴

In accordance with their ecclesiological vision, the Western missionaries orchestrated a project for catholicising the Indian Church: the suppression of the autonomous metropolitan status of the Church of St Thomas Christians and its annexation to the Latin Church, the eradication of the Law of Thomas and the Eastern rite which constituted the distinctive identity of this Church, as well as the introduction of the Latin rite and

Western law. In accordance with this ecclesiological vision the missionaries endeavored to realize their project through legislative and administrative acts. Already in 1585 the third provincial council of Goa ordered that the Roman ritual, the Roman Missal, the Roman Breviary, and the Roman Pontifical were to be translated into Chaldean (Syriac) for the use of the St Thomas Christians. The Council decreed:

Moreover, for the same reason, it seemed to this Council that, since for the time being Latin could not be utilized, the Roman Missal and the Roman Breviary, renewed according to the order of the Council of Trent, are to be translated into Chaldean (Syriac); and that from the Roman Pontifical and the Roman Sacerdotal (Ritual) are to be translated those parts necessary for conferring (sacred) Orders, and for administering the sacraments...³⁵

The intention of the Goan authorities was to expunge the Eastern rite from India and to introduce gradually the Latin rite among the St Thomas Christians as well. Since the St Thomas Christians believed that the Apostle Thomas, in Aramaic or Syriac, the language of Our Lord, bequeathed their prayers and rites to them it was not possible to replace immediately Syriac with Latin. Considering this fact the Council ordered the translation of the Latin liturgical books into Syriac for the time being.

The Synod of Diamper (1599) condemned the law of Thomas, so dear to the Christians in India as a "manifest error and heresy" and made them pronounce in the profession of faith: "I do likewise confess and believe that in pure Christianity there is only one law of our Lord Jesus Christ, true God, one only faith, and one only baptism; which one only law was preached by all the holy Apostles, and their disciples and successors after the same manner. I do therefore condemn and reject all those who ignorantly teach that there was one law of St Thomas and another law of Peter..."³⁶ The seventh decree of third session further states:

The Synod is with great sorrow sensible of that heresy, and perverse error, sown by the schismatics in this diocese, to the great prejudice of souls; which is, that there was one law of St. Thomas, and another of St. Peter which made two

different and distinct Churches, and both immediately from Christ; and that the one had nothing to do with the other; neither did the prelate of the one owe any obedience to the prelate of the other; and that they who had followed the law of St. Peter, had endeavored to destroy the Law of St. Thomas, for which they had been punished by him; all which is manifest error, schism, and heresy, there being but one law to all Christian which is that which was given and declared by Jesus Christ the Son of God and preached by the Holy Apostles all over the world...

Of course the missionaries presented the St Thomas Christian concept of particular law in the extreme negative sense in order to demonstrate that it was a manifest heresy to be condemned. But the law of Thomas, in its original and authentic form, rich in its ecclesiological content and incomprehensible to the Western missionaries of that epoch, had nothing to do with any heresy or error.

The Synod of Diamper endorsed the decision of the provincial council of Goa (1585) and made legislation for the complete substitution of the Eastern rite and the law of Thomas with the Latin rite and the Latin law. In the profession of faith conducted on the second day of the Synod, the St Thomas Christians were obliged to confess that "I admit and receive all the customs, rites, and ceremonies, received and approved of in the Roman Church, in the solemn administration of the said seven sacraments..." (session II, decree 1). While dealing with the sacraments and sacramentals the Synod also ordered the translation of almost all the liturgical books of the Latin Church into Syriac for the use of the St Thomas Christians.³⁷

In fact, the priests were enjoined to wear Latin vestments "in the administration of the holy sacraments" and "likewise to use the rites and ceremonies prescribed in the Roman ceremonial, which the said Metropolitan has commanded to be translated into the Syriac and to be kept in all churches, which contains the forms of baptizing, of anointing the sick, of marrying, of sacramental absolution, with the customary prayers therein; of administering the holy sacrament of the altar, of exorcisms of the church, for people possessed with the devil, the blessings of holy water, of ashes, of chains and branches, as also the form of burying the dead, old and young, and of reconciling churches and churchyards..." (session VIII, decree XXII).

In accordance with the Portuguese project, after the Synod of Diamper on 20 December 1599 Pope Clement VIII appointed Francis Ros SJ (the first Latin bishop), in the St Thomas Christian see of Angamaly. Bishop Ros received episcopal consecration at Goa on 28 January 1601 and on 1 May of the same year he reached Angamaly and took possession of his diocese.³⁸ On 20 December 1599 Pope Clement VIII (1592-1603) suppressed the autonomous metropolitan status of the see of St Thomas Christians, reduced it to the status of a simple diocese and annexed it to the Latin Church, making it a suffragan of the archdiocese of Goa.³⁹ Thus according to the ecclesiology of the Western missionaries of that epoch the Church of St Thomas Christians became fully Catholic and part of the universal Church, headed by the Roman Pontiff.

The ecclesiology of the St Thomas Christians, condemned by the Western missionaries, was solemnly proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council, when it officially taught: "By divine Providence it has come about that various Churches, established in various places by the apostles and their successors, have in the course of time coalesced into several groups, organically united, which, preserving the unity of faith and the unique divine constitution of the universal Church, enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical usage, and their own theological and spiritual heritage" (LG 23). Similarly the Council stated: "These individual Churches, whether of the East or the West, although they differ somewhat among themselves in rite, that is, in liturgy, ecclesiastical discipline, and spiritual heritage... are of equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to the others as regards rite and they enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations, also in respect of preaching the Gospel to the whole world (cf. Mark 16, 15) under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff" (OE 3).

Thus the Council set aside the doctrine of the superiority of the Latin Church and the Latin rite officially taught for several centuries and unambiguously declared the equality of Churches and their rites. As held by the St Thomas Christians, the Council recognized the right of the individual Churches in the Catholic communion to have their own liturgical, theological and spiritual heritage as well as proper particular law. After the Second Vatican Council it is evident to all that the endeavours of the Western missionaries to uproot the liturgy and the particular law of the St Thomas Christians was the consequence of their ecclesiological myopia.

With the promulgation of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, the enactment of particular law for each Eastern Church is not simply a possibility, but an obligation. The "Guidelines for the Revision of the Code of Oriental Canon Law", approved at the first Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission of 18-23 March 1974, specified that "the new Code should limit itself to the codification of the discipline common to all the Oriental Churches, leaving to the competent authorities of these Churches the power to regulate by particular law all the matters not reserved to the Holy See".⁴⁰ Accordingly the new Code promulgated only the common law of the Eastern Churches leaving ample space for the *ius particulare* of each *sui iuris* Church. Concerning particular law, Pope John Paul II in *Sacri canones* stated:

In this matter attention should well be given to all of the things committed to the particular law of each Church *sui iuris*, which are not considered necessary for the common good of all the Oriental Churches. Concerning these things, our mind is that those who are endowed with legislative power in each Church *sui iuris* make provision as quickly as possible through particular norms taking into account the traditions of their own rite as well as the teaching of the Second Vatican Council".⁴¹

As we have seen above, in 1599 the Western missionaries condemned the particular law of the St Thomas Christians, the law of Thomas as a manifest heresy. Paradoxically what the Western missionaries condemned at that epoch, the new Eastern Code canonized and the Roman Pontiff officially required from all the Eastern Catholic Churches. In brief, the ecclesiology of the St Thomas Christians was so progressive that only after four hundred years it could have received a partial recognition in the West. Even today the concept of individual particular Church (*Ecclesia sui iuris*) is alien to many Western theologians, who admit only dioceses and the universal Church and exclude the possibility of any intermediary structures.

5. Theology of Non-Christian Religions

In South India from very early times up to the advent of the Portuguese, the Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Jews (and later Muslims) lived in harmony, effecting a cultural symbiosis and developing a philosophy of

religious tolerance.⁴² Such pluralistic socio-cultural and religious context enabled the St Thomas Christians to develop a progressive theology of non-Christian religions.

On the other hand the Western missionaries, who were formed in the monarchic, monolithic and mono-cultural context, upheld vigorously and misinterpreted the principle: "extra Ecclesiam nulla salus". In accordance with their theological vision, they strove their best to sever all kinds of relationship of the St Thomas Christians with the faithful of other religions, who, according to them, were destined to eternal damnation and hell. They condemned everything non-Western as pagan, heretical and superstitious. An overview of the acts and decrees of the Synod Diamper permits one to glimpse at both the progressive and positive theology of the St Thomas Christians and the negative doctrine of the missionaries concerning non-Christian religions.

The Synod of Diamper condemned as a "manifest heresy" the doctrinal position of the St Thomas Church, which upheld the salvation of all people, who in good faith followed the will of God as known to them and sincerely lived according to their conscience, observing the prescriptions of their own religion. The third session of the Synod condemned three errors, of which,

The third is, that everyone may be saved in his own law; all which are good, and lead men to heaven. Now this is a manifest heresy; there being no other law upon earth in which salvation is found, besides that of our Saviour Christ, for that he only teaches the truth; so that all that live in any other sect, are out of a state of salvation, and shall be condemned to hell; there being no other name given to men, by which we can be saved, but only the name of our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, who was crucified for us...(session III, decree IV).

Although due caution is required against possible exaggerations, one can perceive in this decree the theological basis of the positive attitude of the St Thomas Christians towards the faithful of non-Christian religions.

In Kerala at the time of the Synod of Diamper, there were many elementary schools called *kalaries* in each village or town. Both Hindu and Christian children had learned to read and write in these schools irrespective of the

religious faith of the *asans* or teachers (often Hindus), who were men of moral integrity and exemplary life. The Synod decreed that “it is contrary to the sacred canons, that the children of Christians should go to school to heathen masters” and earnestly recommended all towns and villages “to do all that is in their power to have their children educated by Christian masters, and as for reading and writing, to have the parish priests to teach them to do that in their houses” (session III, decree IX). Interpreting the innocent ceremonies of initiation of education (*vidiarambam*) and invocation of God (*isvaraprarthana*) at the beginning of the lessons as superstitious, “the Synod in virtue of holy obedience and upon pain of excommunication to be *ipso facto* incurred, does command all fathers of families, and others that have charge of children, not to consent to their going to such schools; and doing the contrary, let them be declared excommunicate, and be rigorously punished by the prelate, neither shall such children be suffered to enter the church ...” (the same decree). Similarly the Synod does earnestly recommend to all people, to procure Christian *daias* or midwives in all their towns, who know the form of baptism, because they can succour infants born in danger and because “infidel *daias* do use a great many ceremonies and superstitions with infants, which are foreign to the purity and integrity of the Gospel ...” (session IV, decree VIII). The Synod prohibited the use of those Indian names, which are prevalent among “the heathens” (session IV, decree XVI).

In the eucharistic liturgy (*Qurbana*) of the St Thomas Christians, immediately after entering the sanctuary, being conscious of his unworthiness, the priest officially requested the prayer of the Christian community. In responding, the community proclaimed: “May Christ hear your prayers and receive this sacrifice which you offer for yourself, for us and for the whole world *a minimo usque ad maximum*”. The Synod decreed that “the last words ‘for the whole world *a minimo usque ad maximum*’ must be left out, for the Mass being a public prayer of the church, infidels, schismatics and heretics are not to be prayed for therein, but only Catholics, and as such are united with the Church...” (session V, *The doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass*, decree 1). All references in the *Qurbana* to kings, princes, leaders and rulers (for example the intercessory prayer) were changed into “Catholic kings and princes” since “all the kings and princes of this Church being infidels, and so ought not to be prayed for in the public prayers of the mass...” (Ibid.).

In connection with the festival of the parish, there were processions outside the church, and sometimes throughout the main streets of the place, in

which all the people participated irrespective of their religious faith. In such processions, non-Christian musicians also played instruments like trumpets, but they never entered into the church. They remained either in the *vaddyappura* (house of trumpets) or outside the church. So is the custom in Kerala even today. Archbishop Menezes and the missionaries thought that these musicians remained in the church during the holy sacrament. So the Synod "does command that great care be taken not to suffer them to remain in the church after the creed is said, or the sermon, if there be one, is ended, so that they may not behold the holy sacrament; the vicar shall also be careful to drive all heathens who may come upon such occasion, from the doors and windows of the church".⁴³ Similarly the Synod prohibits "all priests to eat with infidels, whether heathens, Muslims or Jews, upon pain of being suspended for four months, from their office and benefice (session VII, decree XI). The Synod also forbade the participation of Christians in what the missionaries called "heathen festivals" (session IX, decree IV) like *Onam*, which is a common socio-cultural festival in Kerala in which all people participate, irrespective of their religion and faith.

Before the sixteenth century, in dress and ornaments the St Thomas Christians were hardly distinguishable from their high caste Hindu neighbours. Hence the Synod of Diamper decreed: "Whereas the distinction of the faithful from unbelievers, even by outward signs and habits, it is a thing which has always been endeavoured, that the one may be known and divided from the other; therefore the Synod having observed that there is no distinction either in their habits or in their hair, or in anything else, betwixt the Christians of this diocese and the heathen *Nairs*, does command, that henceforward no Christian do presume to bore their ears, or to do anything to make them large, except women, among whom it is a universal ornament: and whosoever shall transgress herein, shall be punished at the pleasure of the prelate, who shall not suffer them to wear an ornament of gold or of anything else in their ears; and whosoever shall presume to wear any such ornament, shall be thrown out of the church, neither shall the *casture* be given them until such time as they are brought to yield effectual obedience, and to leave off such ornaments..." (session IX, decree XVII). In order to avoid communication with "infidels and heaths" the Synod "very earnestly recommend it to all Christians that live in heaths, to do all they are able, either to come and live in some village, or to build new villages with churches, so that they may live more civilly and be separated from the communication of infidels..." (session IX, decree XXIII).

The few decrees, which we have cited, are enough to demonstrate that before the Synod of Diamper the Thomas Christians, who lived in the multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious context in India, maintained a tolerant, benevolent, and positive approach to the faithful of other religions, which permitted them to develop a positive theology of non-Christian religions. In fact, before the Synod of Diamper (1599) the St Thomas Christians had practised and lived what the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent magisterial documents taught about the salvation of the non-Christians (*Lumen gentium*, 16), the seeds or elements of truth found in other religions (*Nostra aetate*, 2; *Ad gentes*, 11), the right to religious freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*, 2), as well as inter-religious dialogue, religious tolerance and collaboration with the non-Christians (*Ad gentes*, 41; *Gaudium et spes*, 92).⁴⁴ However, the triumphalist, militant and exclusivist theological attitude of the Western missionaries considered the “faithful” of non-Christian religions as condemned to hell and eternal damnation. In accordance with their theological vision they interpreted the innocent practices of mutual collaboration and concord between the St Thomas Christians and their brethren of other religions as heresy or paganism and advocated the complete segregation of the Christians from other people.

6. Theology of Mission

The evangelising ministry of a Church depends very much on its doctrine concerning the non-Christian religions. Since the doctrinal position of the St Thomas Christians was not so ‘exclusivist’, they had adopted only those means for evangelization, which the Catholic Church has initiated to employ after the Second Vatican Council. In fact, the St Thomas Christians had a unique mode of evangelization, namely a life of Christian witness. They kept intact the Christian faith and heroically lived it down through the centuries, amidst the vast majority of the “faithful” of other religions without the support of any royal patron or political power. “Keeping intact one’s Christian faith and bearing witness to it amidst the vast majority of non-Christians is evangelization in the proper sense. Any further attempt of preaching, propagation, conversion, founding of the Church etc. has its origin in this basic conviction”.⁴⁵

The Church of St Thomas Christians was a missionary Church, which enriched by the great missionary spirit of the Church of the East, took great care to spread the Gospel. Owing to the evangelising ministry of St Thomas Christians, there sprang Christian communities in different regions

of India like Kalyana (Kalyan), Thana and Gujarat, Goa, Mysore and Vijayanagar, Mangalore, Cape Comorin, Coromandel Coast and especially Mylapore (the residence of the metropolitan for several years), Sind-Punjab, Patna, Orissa, Malwa etc.⁴⁶ According to A. D. Mattam, on the basis of available documentary data which carry unquestionable authority like monuments, records and testimonies, "we can rightly draw the conclusion that there were Christian communities in various places, all over India; Christians were more numerous and widely spread on the Western and Eastern Coasts; Malabar was always a stronghold of Christianity, and the Christian population was concentrated there, at least during certain periods of history. But to speak of St Thomas Christians, or the Church in India, in terms of Malabar, as if confined to Malabar Coast, is contrary to historical facts. It was an All India Church".⁴⁷ But in the course of time many of the Christian communities outside the Malabar Coast became extinct owing to Muslim invasions and various other political, ecclesiastical and historical reasons. In some instances the St Thomas Christians were also absorbed into the Latin Church.⁴⁸

The progressive methods of evangelization prevalent among the St Thomas Christians become all the more evident if we compare it with the missionary activities of the Western missionaries. The zeal for the salvation of souls impelled the Spanish and Portuguese political, military and religious authorities to conquer, confiscate and baptize as many souls as possible, owing to the wrong and extremist interpretation of the principle: "extra Ecclesiam nulla salus". They had firmly believed that all those who did not receive baptism, were condemned to hell. Moreover for the Portuguese political officials evangelization was also a means of promoting trade and commerce as well as of consolidating their political dominion. With due regard for the evangelising ministry of great visionaries like St Francis Xavier and Robert de Nobili, one can affirm that in many places colonialism, trade and evangelization went together: the military conquered, the missionaries baptised. D. Ferroli SJ laments about one such battle in Bangalore:

The religious of the Society (Jesuits) accompanied the expedition as chaplains. It is related that one of them, Fr. Joao Francisco Estephonio, was ever in front of the army, Crucifix in hand, exhorting the soldiers to courage....How would the message of peace be deemed sincere, when brought

to them under such circumstances! It is the tragedy of Christianity to have been so long associated with trading and conquering nations.⁴⁹

The missionary methods employed by the Portuguese for the Christianisation of Goa were unthinkable to the St Thomas Christians of that epoch, who lived in peace and harmony with the “faithful” of other religions. The policy of inter-racial marriages was considered one of the best means to produce a Christian population favourable to Portugal, and the consequent consolidation of Portuguese power in India. Muslim and Hindu women were forced to marry Portuguese soldiers, mariners, petty artisans and even criminals exiled to India. Hindu worship, public performance of Hindu ceremonies and processions were prohibited. Towards the end of the sixteenth century the method called the *rigour of mercy* was adopted for the advancement and progress of the mission work. All the Hindu temples and shrines in Goa and adjacent places were destroyed and their property was confiscated. Erection of new temples and the celebration of ‘gentile rites’ were prohibited. The overall purpose of the application of the *rigour of mercy* was the extinction of ‘gentile cult’ and the ‘conversion all gentiles to our faith’.⁵⁰

The doctrinal position of the St Thomas Christians did not permit them to adopt an aggressive and militant evangelization policy, since it was alien to Indian culture and religious ethos, which was contrary to all kinds of proselytism and forced conversions. The St Thomas Christians accepted to the Church only those people who moved by the Word of God and witnessing life of the Christians freely and voluntarily wanted to embrace the faith. The method of the St Thomas Christians, which respects the freedom of conscience and liberty of religion remains the only credible and efficient means of evangelization for all time.

Authors point out that one of the chief occupations of the St Thomas Christians was military service. According to J. Kollaparambil, one of the main motives for severing the hierarchical relation of the Indian Church with the East Syrian Patriarch was “to bring under a Latin bishop the St Thomas Christians, who were the best warriors in Malabar and extremely obedient to their bishops, and thereby to ensure the military service of a fifty to sixty thousand strong army for the Portuguese colonial state in India”.⁵¹ Other authors also agree that at the end of the fifteenth century

there were several thousands of excellent soldiers among the St Thomas Christians, so much so that the victory of any king in Kerala depended also upon their support.⁵² This fact demonstrates that if the St Thomas Christians had adopted the Portuguese and Spanish militant evangelization policy of that epoch, there would not have been any non-Christian in South India. In brief, the mission theology and the missionary methods of the St Thomas Christians before westernisation are fully compatible with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent magisterium concerning evangelization.

7. Theology of Inculturation

The basic liturgical tradition of the Church of St Thomas Christians is the East Syrian or Chaldean tradition. Their liturgical language was Syriac, a form of Aramaic, namely the language of Our Lord, in which as these Christians were certain, St Thomas had celebrated the Lord's Supper in India and bequeathed to them other rites and prayers. A letter written by three lay Christian leaders to Pope Gregory XIII in 1578 manifests the self-consciousness of the St Thomas Christians concerning their liturgy: "O, Supreme Pastor of all Christians, we your sinful and unworthy sons of India, wish to inform you that we have been Christians from the time of Saint Thomas, a disciple of Our Lord. Thus we have become sharers of the Baptism, sacraments and the Body of Our Lord. Our prayers are in Syriac or the Chaldean language which was handed over to us by our Lord St Thomas, and we and our predecessors have been taught this language..."⁵³ The St Thomas Christians were fully convinced that their Syriac liturgy came directly from St Thomas and not from the Church of the East. Thomas Paremmakkal, the administrator of the St Thomas Christians from 1787 to 1799, in responding to the missionaries who sent accusations to Rome against the St Thomas Christians, manifests well the conviction of these Christians about their rite:

We are Syrians. From the time the Apostle Thomas was in our country and gave us the treasure of the holy faith, we have been, until today, without any break, performing our ecclesiastical ceremonies and practices in the Syriac rite. Your predecessors tried their best to change this ancient rite of ours. But they realized they could not.⁵⁴

After the time of the Apostle, the Indian Christians had only enriched their original Thomistic liturgy by spontaneously receiving and adapting the liturgical developments in the Church of the East, which, founded by the disciples of the Apostle Thomas, had also possessed the same Thomistic spiritual heritage. In fact, the St Thomas Christians celebrated the divine liturgy and the sacraments in the East Syrian rite and lived their faith in harmony with this basic tradition with great devotion and marvellous concord until the arrival of the Western missionaries in the sixteenth century.

Keeping intact the faith and liturgy, the St Thomas Christians adopted and christianised those socio-cultural customs and those Indian rites which were compatible with their Catholic faith. In fact, those people in South India who had accepted Christ and his Gospel due to the evangelising ministry of St Thomas had changed their faith, but continued to maintain the very same customs, traditions and *modus vivendi* of their Indian brethren. So the axiom "Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in Worship" is often employed to indicate the various aspects of the identity of the St Thomas Christian tradition at that epoch.⁵⁵ The names and surnames, life style, architecture of houses and churches, the manner of church-administration, ecclesiastical art, the paraphernalia used in the churches, attire and insignia of the clergy and bishops, educational system, clerical formation, family life, dress and ornaments of the Christian faithful, food style, as well as professions and occupations of the St Thomas Christians were so Indian that they could not be distinguished from their Hindu brethren except in those aspects which were specifically Christian.⁵⁶

Since the St Thomas Christians firmly believed that their ancestors had received at least the essential nucleus of their liturgy and prayers in the Aramaic or Syriac language directly from the Apostle, they never dared to make any modification or change in their Catholic faith and liturgy. Moreover, as the East Syrian liturgical tradition, the developed form of the original Asian Christianity and the Thomistic heritage, was fully in harmony with Indian culture and religious ethos, it seems that at that epoch the St Thomas Christians never felt the need to make modifications in their liturgy in order to adapt it to Indian culture. Nevertheless, whatever emerged spontaneously as a part of the organic growth of the East Syrian liturgical tradition in India with regard to the rites of birth and baptism, Eucharistic celebration, sacrament of penance, marriage, Anointing of the sick, funeral

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rites, religious festivals and processions, Holy Week celebrations, Marian feasts, fasting and abstinence, holy water, pilgrimages and "family liturgy" was really outstanding and unique.⁵⁷

The original Asian and Eastern characteristics of Christianity consonant with Indian culture as well as the autonomy of the St Thomas Christian Church guaranteed by the glorious institutes of archdeaconate and *palliyogam*, enabled the spontaneous evolution and organic growth of the Christian faith on Indian soil and the Christianization of autochthonous socio-cultural customs, traditions and rites in South India. In brief the St Thomas Christian tradition had become one of the religions of India, and was considered as such by the religious and political leaders of that epoch.

The theology of inculturation among the St Thomas Christians consisted in two basic orientations: 1) keep intact the "apostolic" faith and the liturgy, without any watering down of the essentials, but permitting organic growth and progress; 2) adapt the socio-cultural life and the whole *modus vivendi* to the religious and social ethos of the country in the maximum possible manner. The theology of inculturation, which the St Thomas Christians practised until the sixteenth century and which the Western missionaries condemned as paganism, seems to be valid even today and fully in harmony with the magisterium of the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

Since the East Syrian tradition was the basic ecclesial tradition of all the St Thomas Christians until the nineteenth century, in accordance with the principle *lex orandi lex credendi*, we have considered the doctrinal position of the Church of the East as a theological antecedent for evaluating the Mariology and the doctrine of Roman primacy prevalent among the Indian Christians. However we have not strictly adhered to this methodology for all the themes under study because of the limitation of space and considering the particular theological outlook of the St Thomas Christians on those points. We have exposed the progressive theology of the Indian Christians concerning the Church, non-Christian religions, evangelization and inculturation by bringing into intelligent contrast and comparison the *modus vivendi et agendi* of the St Thomas Christians and that of the Western missionaries. Our study attests that the pre-sixteenth century theological insight of the St Thomas Christians corresponds to and in some respects even prevail over the post Vatican Western theology.

Efforts may be made to rehabilitate the authentic theological vision of the St Thomas Christians and to develop an Eastern Catholic Indian theology, based on the basic tradition of the Syro-Malabar Church, namely the East Syrian tradition and the Indian religious and spiritual ethos. By Eastern Catholic Indian theology we mean precisely the systematic and reflective expression of the Catholic faith as lived in the East, using Indian terms, concepts, symbols, images, thought patterns, wisdom, philosophy, as well as socio-cultural and historical traditions, but without altering or compromising the essential content and unity of the faith.

Notes

1. See J. Kollaparambil, "The Impact of the Synod of Diamper on the Ecclesial Identity of the St Thomas Christians", G. Nedungatt, ed., *The Synod of Diamper Revisited*, Rome 2001, 160-164; J. B. Chabot, "L'Autodafé des livres syriaques du Malabar", *Florilegium ou Recueil de Travaux dédiés à Melchior de Vogüé*, Paris 1909, 613-623.
2. X. Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion of the Indian Church of the Saint Thomas Christians*, Kottayam 1982; 49. In pages 49-53 Koodapuzha cites several of such beautiful prayers.
3. Cf. P. J. Podipara, "The Mariology of the Church of the East", *Christian Orient*, vol. 2, no. 4 (December 1981) 175-177.
4. P. J. Podipara, "The Mariology of the Church of the East", 177-182.
5. J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino Vaticana, in qua manuscriptorum codicum Syriacos, Arabicos, Persicos...et Malabaricos, Jusu et munificentia Clementis XI recensuit*, tom. 3, pars 1, 516; X. Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion...*, 54.
6. S. Giamil, *Genuinae Relationes inter Sedem Apostolicam et Assyriorum Orientalium seu Chaldaeorum Ecclesiam*, Romae 1902, 4-5; P. J. Podipara, "The Mariology of the Church of the East", 176-177.
7. Francis Ros S J, *De Erroribus Nestorianorum qui in hac India Orientali versantur*, annotated by I. Hausherr, *Orientalia Christiana* vol. XI (1), n. 40, Rome 1928.
8. Francis Ros S J, *De Erroribus Nestorianorum ...*, 21.
9. D. Ferrolì, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, vol. 1, Bangalore 1939, 178.
10. For details, Bernard Thoma, *Mar Thoma Kristianikal*, (*St Thomas Christians*), 2nd edition, Kottayam 1992, 412-432.
11. "A Igreja de Corlengate foy feita antes muito dos Portugueses uirem a India. Sua invocação he de Madre de Deus". Francis Ros SJ, "Report on the Serra", British Library MS Add. 9853, ff. 86-99, published in

- G. Nedungatt, ed., *The Synod of Diamper Revisited*, Rome 2001, 358 (Portuguese), 359 (English).
12. H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, n. 252; N. P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, London 1990, 59.
13. N. P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 58.
14. See *Missale Romanum, Ex Decreto Sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini Restitutum, S. Pii V Pontificis Maximi Jussu Editum...*
15. AAS 87 (1995) 685.
16. AAS 87 (1995) 686.
17. Cf. P. J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, London-Bombay 1970, 46-55; for details G. Ebdejesus Khayyath, *Syri Orientales seu Chaldei Nestoriani et Romanorum Pontificum Primatus*, Romae 1870.
18. See the various canons and documents cited in X. Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion...*, 64-80.
19. Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo-Armario Jesuistico, livro 28, 36-37; J. Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper*, Rome 1958, 13; the complete text of this letter is found also in G. M. Antão, *De Synodi Diamperitanae natura atque decretis*, Goa 1952, 145-149.
20. Sacra Congregazione per la Chiesa Orientale, Codificazione Canonica Orientale (Prot. N. 494/37), Fonti, Serie II - Fascicolo IX, *Fontes Juribus Canonici Syro-Malankarensium*, edited by P. J. Podipara, Vatican City 1939; 13-14: A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 139 & 488.
21. For the original text with English translation, G. Schurhammer, *The Malabar Church and Rome during the Early Portuguese Period and before*, Trichinopoly 1934, 26-30 or A. Vallavanthara, *India in 1500 AD, The Narrative of Joseph the Indian*, Kottayam 1984, 167-173.
22. G. Schurhammer, *The Malabar Church and Rome...* 31; emphasis as in the original.
23. "Non conosciamo nel primo millennio nessun caso di una nomina diretta di un metropolita o di un semplice vescovo da parte di Roma avvenuto nel territorio dei patriarcati orientali". W. De Vries, "La S. Sede ed i patriarcati cattolici d'Oriente", OCP 27 (1961), 321; Cf. also his book *Rom und die Patriarchate des Ostens*, Freiburg-München 1963, 20 and V. Parlato, *L'ufficio patriarcale nelle Chiese orientali dal IV al X secolo*, Padova 1969, 80-87.
24. S. Giamil, *Genuinae Relationes...*, 85.
25. Cf. X. Koodapuzha, "Ecclesial Identity of the St Thomas Christians", in *Oriental Churches Theological Dimensions*, Kottayam 1988, 74.

26. Cf. Paulino a S. Bartholomaeo, *Viaggio alle Indie Orientali*, Roma 1796, 137; P. J. Podipara, *The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church*, Alleppey 1976, 106; A. Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, Kottayam 1987, 42; Anantakrishna Ayyar, *Anthropology of Syrian Christians*, Ernakulam 1926, 133.
27. *The Varthamanappusthakam*, written by T. Paremmakkal, translated into English with an Introduction and notes by P. J. Podipara, OCA 190, Rome 1971, 41.
28. *The Varthamanappusthakam*, 43-44; cf. also page 46.
29. *The Varthamanappusthakam*, 33.
30. X. Koodapuzha, "The Role of Episcopacy in the Unity of the Church", Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, *Papers and Joint Statements 1989-2000*, Kottayam 2001, 142.
31. See Francis Ros SJ, "Report on the Serra", 340-341; A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 339-341.
32. J. Perumthottam *A Period of Decline of the Mar Thoma Christians, (1712-1752)*, Kottayam 1994, 264.
33. A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 484.
34. G. Schurhammer, *The Malabar Church and Rome...*, 37.
35. Session 3, decree 7, *Bullarium Patronatus Portugalliae Regum*, appendix, tom. 1, 75.
36. Session II, decree 1 & session III, decree VII; for the acts and decrees of the Synod of Diamper, see A. De Gouvea, *Synodo Diocesano da Igreja e bispado de Angamale dos antigos christaos de Sam Thome das Serras do Malavar das partes da India Oriental*, Combra 1606, 3-62; Latin version, Mansi, vol. 35, 1161-1368 and J. F. Raulin, *Historia Ecclesiae Malabaricae cum Diamperitana Synodo*, Romae 1745, 59-280; English version, J. Hough, *The History of Christianity in India from the Commencement of the Christian Era*, vol. 2, London, 1839, 511-683 or Scaria Zacharia, *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper 1599*, Edamattam 1994, 73-214.
37. For details, see P. Pallath, "Were the St Thomas Christians in India Nestorians at the Time of the Synod of Diamper in 1599?", *Ephrem's Theological Journal*, vol. 5, no.1 (March 2001), 62-66.
38. D. Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, vol. 1, 292.
39. Cf. Paulino a S. Bartholomaeo, *India Orientalis Christiana*, Romae 1794, 61; *Bullarium Patronatus Portugalliae*, tom. 1, 260 & *Bullarium Patronatus Portugalliae*, tom. 2, 8.

40. *Nuntia* 3 (1976) 21.
41. John Paul II, apostolic constitution *Sacri canones*, AAS 83 (1990) 1038.
42. Cf. A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 152-154.
43. Session V, *The Doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass*, decree XIV. At that time the missionaries could not have even imagined the celebration of the Holy Mass at St Peter's Square and at the major squares and stadiums in the world especially during papal visits, in which all people, who come to see the pope, participate.
44. Some of these ideas are further set forth and clarified in the post conciliar documents. See Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio* Vatican 1991, nos. 52-57; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican 1992, nos. 842-848; International Theological Commission, *Christianity and the World Religions*, Vatican 1997; The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, Vatican 2000, nos. 20-22.
45. X. Kochuparampil, *Evangelization in India*, Kottayam 1993, 271.
46. See A. D. Mattam, *The Indian Church of St Thomas and Her Missionary Enterprises Before the Sixteenth Century*, Kottayam 1975, 14-35; *Forgotten East: Mission, Liturgy and Spirituality of the Eastern Churches*, Satna 2001, 62-81; E. R Hambye, "Medieval Christianity in India: the Eastern Church", in H.C. Perumalil & E.R. Hambye, *Christianity in India*, Alleppey 1972, 32; H. Hosten, *Antiquities from San Thomé and Mylapore*, Culcutta 1936, 402-463; X. Kochuparampil, *Evangelization in India*, , 247-265.
47. A.D. Mattam, *Forgotten East...*, 92.
48. A.D. Mattam, *Forgotten East...*, 79-81.
49. D. Ferroli, *The Jesuits in Malabar*, vol. 1, 146.
50. S. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, The Beginnings to AD 1707*, Cambridge 1984, 129-133; A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 437-441 & 461-468.
51. J. Kollaparambil, "The Impact of the Synod of Diamper ..." , 153; see the sources in footnote no. 18.
52. See A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 156-157; P. J. Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship", *Ostkirchliche Studien* 8 (June 1959) 92-93; G. Menacherry, "Social Life and Customs of the St. Thomas Christians in the Pre-Diamper Period", in B. Puthur, ed., *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period*, Kochi 2000, 193; Vincenzo Poggi, "Gesuiti e Diamper", G. Nedungatt, ed., *The Synod of Diamper Revisited*, Rome 2001, 112.

53. S. Giamil, *Genuinae Relationes...*, 85.
54. *The Varthamanappusthakam*, 247. The expression "Syrians" simply signifies those who use the Syriac liturgy. Since the liturgical language of the St Thomas Christians was Syriac, they were often called Syrians or *Suriani* (Catholics).
55. This axiom was coined by P. J. Podipara in his article, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship", 82-104.
56. For details, see A. Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 23-63; Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, 80-85; "The Thomas Christians and Adaptation", *Eastern Churches Review* 111 (1970) 171-177.
57. For details about inculturation in liturgy, see P. Pallath, "The St Thomas Christian Church before the Sixteenth Century: A Model for Inculturation", *Ephrem's Theological Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, (March 2002) 18-32; P. Vazheeparampil, "The *Toma Marga*, Icon of the Indo-Oriental Identity of the Thomas Christians of India", *Christian Orient* vol. XV, n. 1, (1994) 3-23; P. J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, 85-94.